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A Qualitative Study of Hispanic Protestant College Students

by Edwin Romero, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona

Introduction

Catholicism and Hispanic culture are indivisible. In 1997, seventy six percent of Latinos identified themselves as Catholic (Cavazos, 2004). The minority status of Hispanic Protestants is evident in the lack of historical information available regarding this population (Cortés, 1980, Crespo, 2003; Warner, 1998). Hispanic Catholics are increasingly discussing – with great alarm and distain – the steady departure of Hispanics from the Catholic faith and the growth of Hispanic Protestant churches in recent years (Cavazos, 2004; Hispanics Turn Evangelical, 1994; Deck, 1994). Deck (1994) articulates the concern of Catholic Hispanics:

Given the need to resist the onslaught of Americanization and certain forms of modernization, the thoughtful Hispanic will view evangelical efforts to convert Hispanics as a particularly vicious attack on his or her cultural identity. Even though the Hispanic American may not be active in practicing the Catholic faith, he or she perceives that the culture is permeated by a kind of Catholic ethos that revolves around a rich collection of rites and symbols.... The evangelical penchant for reducing the mediation between God and humanity to the Scriptures is antithetical to the Hispanic Catholic tendency to multiple mediations. (pp. 420-421).

There is a sense of divide, even hostility, between Hispanic Protestants and Hispanic Catholics. This study will focus on Hispanic Protestant college students. I will focus particularly on Hispanic students who identify with the Hispanic culture and maintain the heritage, as outlined by Crespo (2003). The purpose of the study is to explore the meaning that this group of students makes of their religion's minority status within the Hispanic culture, the effect that it has on their connectedness to the campus community, and the influence it all has on their precipitance through college.



Literature Review

Spiritual Support

The expression of Christian Faith on college campuses is well documented and quite prevalent (Cherry, DeBerg, & Porterfield, 2001; McMurtrie, 2001). There are numerous national and international Christian clubs and organizations fruitfully operating on college and university campuses throughout the country. Studies show that these clubs support students through the transition to college (Fleicher & Davis, 2004; Low & Handal, 1995; McMurtrie, 2001). However, little is known of the impact or effectiveness of these groups in reaching out to the minority students. If minority college students do not find spiritual support through these groups, where do they find spiritual support? Do they feel a need for spiritual support on campus? Do they struggle without it? These questions are essential retainment questions.

There is a considerable amount of research available that reflects the positive effects of spirituality on the academic performance of students (Jeynes, 2003a, 2003b; Sikkink & Hernandez, 2003). Furthermore, there is a significant positive correlation between emotional and mental health and religious involvement (Fleischer & Davis, 2004; Schafer, 1997). Most significant to this study, researchers have found a significant relationship between religious involvement and ease of adjustment for college freshmen (Low & Handal, 1995). This study will investigate the adjustment experiences of Hispanic Christian college students, the source of spiritual support for these students, and the influence of spirituality on their academic performance.

Connectedness to Campus

As a recent study suggests, the success of Hispanic serving institutions (HSI) should be measured by the degree of student engagement in all facets of campus life, in addition to graduation rates (Benítez & DeAro, 2004). Hernandez (2000) found eleven central themes that support the retention of Latino college students. Four of the themes, friends and peers, faculty and staff, co-curricular involvement, and finding a Latino community, suggest that finding a network of support on campus is crucial to the retention of Hispanic students. Do Hispanic Christians feel connected to their campuses? Do they feel connected to the Hispanic community, in particular, on campus? The interest of this study is to explore the experiences of Hispanic Christian students in developing a support network on campus and the influence of this on their academic success.

The Role of Family

In their study of generational trends, Howe & Strauss (2003) found that today's generation of college students identifies with the values of their parents and that they "co-purchase" the college experience for the student (pp.41-42). In addition, Hernandez (2000) found that the support and encouragement of the family played a key role in the retention of Hispanic college students (p. 579). It is of current interest to explore the influence of the family on the religion and the retention of Hispanic Christian college students.

Identity



According to Phinney's model of ethnic identity development, "...the issue of ethnic identity is important to the development of a positive self-concept for minority adolescents" (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. 79). Researchers have yet to explore thoroughly the impact of being a minority within a minority on identity development. This study is interested in the meaning that Hispanic Protestant students make of cultural conflicts that are related to their faith, and how they "reconstruct social knowledge" in developing their ethnic identity (Torres & Magolda, 2004). What unique cultural conflicts do they experience, what does it mean to them, and how does it affect their identity development?

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to identify salient themes and patterns in the experiences of Hispanic Protestant college students, and the meaning they make of these experiences. The research questions that guided this exploration are as follow:

- (1) *What is the collective experience of Hispanic Protestant college students?*
- (2) *What meaning do these students make of their collective experience?*
- (3) *What influences the retention and academic success of these students?*

This study explored the compounding factors of being a Hispanic Protestant in a predominantly Catholic-Hispanic community with the overall experience of being a Hispanic in a Hispanic serving public institution. It drew upon relevant retention theories, Latino Identity Development Theory, Acculturation Theory, as well as recent findings on the effects of religiosity on academic success.

I utilized in-depth interviewing as the primary method of inquiry in this study. I conducted the research in the qualitative methodology because the nature of the exploratory research question required a methodology that could facilitate the multiple realities of the subjects simultaneously and provide a rich description of the experiences of the subjects (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). The study took place in a midsize four-year southwestern public university – a Hispanic serving institution (HSI) – during the Winter Quarter of 2005. In a survey conducted in 2003, 27.9% of students on this campus identified as Hispanic; that is 4,715 students. There are five registered Christian clubs and organizations active on the campus and several Christian interest groups, including a Hispanic Protestant interest group. The institution has a regional-access focus. It is an 85 to 90 percent commuter campus.

Participants and Data Collection

In an effort to simplify the study, I selected participants based on a number of criteria that would homogenize the sample. I limited the sample to first generation Hispanic college students who I identified as moderately acculturated (Torres, 2004, Torres & Rollock, 2004). The participants were six first-generation Hispanic college students who self-identify as Christian (which they understood to mean Protestant) and identify solely as Hispanic, Latino/a, or Chicano/a. Three of the participants were lower-division college students and three were upper-division college students. Four of the participants





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were female and two were male. I identified potential participants through past interactions, a convenience sample. All participation was voluntary, I made a great effort to protect participant anonymity, and I secured their informed consent. All interviews were one-time interviews. They were no longer than one hour in duration.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

All the interviews were tape-recorded and I took thorough field notes. I identified nineteen possible themes from a review of the data, then coded the data (see Appendix) and constructed refined typologies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I established credibility through triangulation, via multiple interviews and the coding technique. In addition, I addressed transferability through a rich description of the findings, dependability through the credibility of the research and confirmability through a thorough documentation of field notes.

Results

Peer Relationships and Connectedness to Campus

The research resulted in five themes, or interesting characteristics and experiences that help us understand this population, the first of which is connectedness to the campus community. The students in this study felt connected to and accepted by the Hispanic community on campus, although the three upperclassmen felt that they are not engaged in campus life. They saw connectedness to campus as connectedness to peers – when they were asked about feeling connected to the campus, they answered by describing their peer relationships. As one student put it, when asked about his connection to the Hispanic campus community, "...half of my friends are Hispanic. We all have a little connection: we speak a unique language; we can relate: we come from struggling immigrant families, [and] we have ties to another country." They all strongly expressed that making friends in college has been a very positive experience, which seemed to have a strong relationship to their connectedness to the campus.

At the same time, they expressed that they do not participate in certain activities, particularly parties, because of their faith. The students saw this as a conflict, which, they felt, is unique as it is experienced by Christians on college campuses: "...it's just, friends want you to go out clubbing all night and it's not what you want to do.... I just feel bad"; and, "there's a lot of 'party over here'; it's different – the way I think or believe – than those who don't have the commitment to church: what they believe is cool." Nonetheless, the students did not express feeling held back from experiencing college life. As one student put it, "[I am] not impressed by the 'fun' things of the world."

Need for Spiritual Support on Campus

In regards to sensing a need for spiritual support on campus, the students were divided. On one hand, students responded in this way: "no, I have my family, and my church brings me support. That's where I find the fuel for the week.... I'm always in contact with people back home. They come visit me and pray for me." On the other hand, students responded, "yes, definitely yes. I have one Latino Christian friend; we talk at a different level. Most of the day, you are around people who don't understand."





The students generally expressed a need for “prayer... sometimes; [a need] to have a connection, and talk, and trust [other students].”

They all felt that their church was the primary source of spiritual support. Nonetheless, most expressed a desire to relate with other students on campus on a spiritual level – someone to pray with and talk to about spiritual conflicts. They felt that they did not know many “practicing” Christians on campus, and would like to, “Most of them are Christian, they have the same fundamental beliefs, but they don’t practice them. I guess I don’t talk about it with them...I guess that’s bad...I don’t know.”

In addition, the students expressed that they were more comfortable discussing spiritual matters with other Hispanics on campus than they do with other Hispanics off campus. For instance, when asked if he felt comfortable as a Protestant in the Latino community on campus, one student responded, “Yes, they are more open minded on campus. I’ve had arguments [off campus] in the past, because most Hispanics are Catholic and they want to know the differences. They are surprised to find I’m not Catholic.” The students felt that the Hispanic community on campus is inclusive of Hispanic Protestants, more so than off campus.

Identity Development: An Insider, Yet Outsider

All participants self-identified as Hispanic and felt very much a part of the Hispanic community. Nonetheless, they all expressed having felt like outsiders in the Hispanic community because of their faith at some point. They emphasized that they sense conflict or division between Catholic-Hispanics and Protestant-Hispanics. In fact, they assume a clear distinction between the terms Catholic and Christian. Students protuberantly perturbed expressed that others often assume they are Catholic, and that many Hispanic traditions are actually Catholic traditions – such as Quinceañeras. As one student recalled, “The majority of Hispanics in L.A. are Catholic. Everyone talks about the Virgin Mary and Saints in religious matters, and sense I don’t praise them, sometimes I’m looked down upon. In high school, they [friends] would do the cross thing and they would look at me as weird...they expect me to be Catholic.” Another student noted that at the “Cesar Chavez Day celebration [on campus], they bring their religious symbols...; very different faith, sometimes I feel like an outsider, [it is a] very different faith.” Nonetheless, they felt connected to the Hispanic community.

Faith and Academics

The participants expressed that their faith has had a great influence on their academics. They credited faith as being the source of their academic confidence and motivation, as guiding their decision-making and goal setting. They also credited their faith with reducing their worry and anxiety. On the other hand, the participants also expressed a feeling of conflict between fully participating in church and fully devoting themselves academically – a matter of prioritization:





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"I pray and ask God to give me wisdom, 'saviduria', that the major will serve people; for wisdom of where he wants me to be. Balancing church and school, you can't give one hundred percent to school and church; you need to prioritize.... My mom was scared [when I came to college]. 'They are going to change you and your beliefs', she said. I stopped choir because I have too much work...; then [I] realized that without serving God, you can't be fulfilled."

The general conclusion that the students came to is that church is more important. Thus, these students may not always complete their schoolwork. Half of the students interviewed individually averaged roughly fourteen hours per week in church. Five of the six students played a major role in their church: worship leaders, youth leaders, and Bible study leaders.

Role of Family

Family plays a large role in the lives of these students. The participants all stated that they feel supported by their families, and they all emphasized how proud their parents are of them. "They are proud of me and brag that their daughter will be a college graduate, it feels good." They each made a statement to this extent when asked if their parents support their education.

There appears to be a connection between the choices students made in church attendance and family, although the connection was not clearly established in this study. All of the participants had immediate family that shared their faith and attended the same church. Five of the six students attend Spanish church services. The students who live on campus travel great distances on the weekends, sometimes during weeknights, to attend their home churches – often missing class to do so. However, the motive for this behavior was not clearly established. The connection between church attendance choices, spiritual support, and family should be explored further, as it seems to have unique qualities within this cultural group.

Discussion

Limitations

The purpose of this study was exploratory. Thus, the typologies can most assuredly be refined. Furthermore, time and financial constraints influenced the size and scope of the study. Therefore, the findings of the study are limited in that the students I interviewed are all studying at a public commuter campus. The culture on commuter campuses is such that students maintain ties with their communities of origin far more than students on residential campuses do. Thus, the nature of support networks likely varies from campus to campus.

The needs students perceive will likely vary from campus to campus, as well. What would I have found on a residential campus where the students are not able to attend church with their families or visit them on the weekends? Would there be a greater sense of need for spiritual support on campus? Students on residential campuses would likely express a greater need for spiritual support on campus. Furthermore, this study was conducted on a secular campus. Hispanic Christian students on Christian campuses would likely offer a unique perspective.





Future Research

There are many implications for future research opportunities stemming from this study. In the future, researchers should explore in greater depth the role of faith as it influences the sense of connectedness to the college campus and retention rates for minority students. Researchers must study this sociological phenomenon: the sense of division amongst Hispanics along the lines of Catholic versus Christian. It would be interesting to find if there is a significant difference in the level and area of campus involvement between Catholic and Christian Protestant college students. Lastly, it would be interesting to reconduct this study on a larger scale, particularly on Christian campuses.

Implications for Practice

There are many implications for college student affairs practice in this study. While the students in this study did not express a great need for spiritual support on campus, they did state that they did not participate in social events, in general, on campus – particularly parties. Thus, on campuses that are largely residential, there may be a greater need to support the development of a social network for this population of students, the lack of which should be evident in poor retention and persistence rates.

In addition, the findings on the influence of faith on academics have widespread implications for the work of college student affairs professionals; particularly those involved in academic advising. Students in this study stated that they could not study something they did not believe in or felt called to do. Furthermore, students will need assistance in reconciling their need to participate fully in church activities and their desire to put forth their best efforts academically.

Lastly, the finding that Hispanic Protestant college students feel more comfortable discussing issues of spirituality with Hispanic Catholic students on campus, rather than off campus, is largely significant. This could be a great opportunity to assist these students in identity-development, intercommunity relations, and sensitivity to diversity.



Appendix

Codes of Potential Themes

1. **NOMISS-** Don't feel like they are missing out or held back from experiencing college life in any way.
2. **MISS-** Do feel like they are missing out or held back from experiencing college life in some way.
3. **Fds-** Expressed that they are enjoying making new friends/ meeting new people in college.
4. **Curr-** Felt – in a negative way – that, at some point, the curriculum has challenged their faith.
5. **CvS-** Feel conflicted between fully participating in church and fully devoting themselves academically; priority conflict.
6. **Nopy-** State that they do not attend college parties with peers.
7. **NoCs-** State that they do not know many practicing Christians (Protestants) on campus.
8. **Fam-** Family is a source of spiritual and academic support.
9. **Ch-** Church is the primary source of spiritual support.
10. **Cath-** Expressed a sense of conflict or division with Catholic Hispanics.
11. **Ac-** Expressed that their faith is the source of their academic confidence and motivation.
12. **Go-** Expressed that their faith guides their decision-making and goal setting.
13. **Wo-** Expressed that their faith reduces their worry, or anxiety.
14. **On-** Expressed that they felt more comfortable with Catholic-Hispanics on campus than off campus when discussing spiritual matters and in general.
15. **Need-** Expressed that they felt a need for spiritual support on campus.
16. **Id-** At some point, felt like outsiders in the Hispanic community because of their Faith.
17. **Noin-** Expressed that they did not feel engaged, or connected with the campus.
18. **Conn-** Expressed feeling connected to or accepted by the Latino community on campus.
19. **Argue-** Expressed the desire to avoid an argument or having experienced the development of an argument when discussing spiritual matters with Catholic-Hispanics.

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